

How to Write a Jihadist's Biography, or Not

By A.J. Caschetta

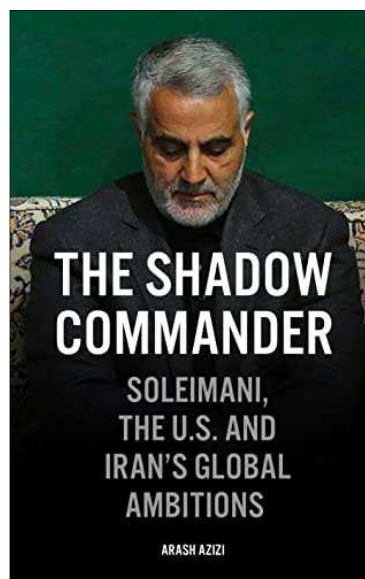
The Shadow Commander: Soleimani, the U.S., and Iran's Global Ambitions. By Arash Azizi. London: Oneworld Publications, 2020. \$27.95 (\$16.95, paper).

The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad. By Thomas Hegghammer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. \$36.99.

The biographers of killers and terrorists deserve both our sympathy and suspicion. Historians and apologists spend years of their lives researching and writing about such villains but for different reasons. Historians work to record and contextualize important events and “set the record straight” while apologists labor to soften the images of their subjects. Two recent biographies of Islamists who led global jihad movements are illustrative of these two very different kinds of biographers and their books.

Azizi, Ph.D. candidate in history and Middle Eastern studies at New York University, is a panegyrist who wrote a hagiography of Qassem Soleimani in which he purports to explain how “a boy from the margins of Iranian society rose to become a commander fêted by thousands and feared by many more.”

Hegghammer, former senior research fellow at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment and now senior research fellow at All Souls College, Oxford University, is an analyst who wrote a masterful



biography of Abdallah Azzam, documenting his life and history and explaining in great detail “why jihadism went global.”

The two books offer stark contrasts on almost every level—from depth and quality to tone and objectivity, all of which determine their reliability.

Hegghammer tells readers that his years-long project was undertaken “to help improve our collective understanding of history.” The task is a formidable one. As he describes it, his book

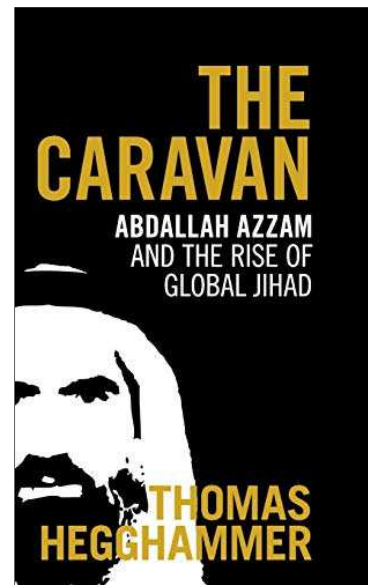
is a biography of Abdullah Azzam, the Palestinian ideologue who led the recruitment of Arab fighters to Afghanistan in the 1980s. It is also a history of the Afghan Arabs, the world's first truly global foreign-fighter mobilization.

The densely-detailed book—695 pages of text, notes, maps, timelines, and bibliographies—also includes a website (www.azzambook.net) with even more information. Organized roughly but not rigidly in chronological order, Hegghammer’s approach breaks down Azzam’s forty-eight years into sixteen chapters based on the phases of his life: from “Fighter” and “Scholar” during Azzam’s early life, through “Recruiter,” “Ideologue,” and “Mujahid” in the middle years, and concluding with “Martyr” and “Icon.”

By contrast, Azizi’s book is a cheap attempt to capitalize on what he calls Donald Trump’s “reckless” decision to kill Soleimani. It is less than half the length of Hegghammer’s book; its bibliography, fewer than two and a half pages, pales in comparison to Hegghammer’s 34-page bibliography. Among Azizi’s scant sources are eight books published in Tehran and other dubious sources, including a conversation with Hamid Dabashi, the virulent, Israel-hating, Islamic Republic-supporting Columbia University professor.

Azizi’s *The Shadow Commander* begins and ends with Soleimani’s killing. In between, one finds some history of Iran, including questionable claims and enough fawning public relations content to make the entire Soleimani family happy for decades to come. Buried beneath the praise of Soleimani are some potentially valuable accounts of his youth, rise through the ranks of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and battlefield exploits. But far too many details, anecdotes, and purported facts are ascribed to anonymous sources or untraceable interviews, casting an apocryphal shadow over the entire book. Readers who do not trust Azizi will invariably suspect him, and he gives critics far too many opportunities to do so.

In Azizi’s mind, Soleimani built an empire and, before his death, was likely contemplating a run for the presidency of that



empire. His belief that Soleimani’s leadership and influence will be felt far into the future has not aged well as the Iranian empire is presently tottering and showing signs of weakness.

Any biography of Soleimani worth reading would have at least one chapter devoted to Iran’s deployment of advanced improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Iraq against U.S. and NATO forces. Azizi’s does not. Soleimani’s legacy is as much one of lost limbs as of empire-building, but that fact is lost on his biographer.

Hegghammer approaches his subject with an objectivity that Azizi never attempts. He does not rely on unnamed sources and lists the names and dates of those he interviewed. His scholarly approach to his subject makes him part archivist, part historian, and part journalist, or as he puts it, the task “required working roughly two-thirds as a historian and one-third as a social scientist.” Azizi, on the other hand, sprinkles his text with “facts” and “stories” and then supports them with footnotes indicating interviews with unknown people who allegedly knew Soleimani, grew up with

Soleimani, or fought with Soleimani. Maybe they did, and maybe they did not.¹

Hegghammer is clearly impressed with Azzam's accomplishments and understands the pivotal role that he played in the rise of al-Qaeda, the importance of his 1979 fatwa calling for jihad in Afghanistan, and the 1987 book *Join the Caravan*. But one never gets the impression that Hegghammer admires Azzam.

Azizi, on the other hand, obviously admires Soleimani, making it far easier to suspect than trust him. For instance, his habit of referring to Soleimani by the oddly honorific and chummy moniker "Hajj Qassem" does not inspire confidence. And hyperbole is everywhere, as when he explains, the "world panicked" upon learning that Soleimani, who was like "a mythical bandit

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Azizi makes no attempt to hide his admiration for Soleimani, signaling to his audience from the outset that they

are reading an effort at myth-making. Every page drips with admiration for the "shadow commander," whom Azizi calls "larger than life" on the first page of the introduction and insists that "he changed the world." Towards the end of the book, Azizi emotes that after Soleimani's killing, "the world held its breath in anticipation of the shape of Iranian revenge."

Like a *Bildungsroman* novel, Azizi's biography lovingly narrates the apprenticeship of young Soleimani from his humble village upbringing, to his Kerman karate days, throughout his rise up the ranks of the IRGC. The biographer misses few opportunities to comment on his subject's good looks, athletic physique, boxing and martial arts prowess, and all around manliness. Parts of it read like a poor imitation of Hemingway, minus the booze and sex.

Azizi is also a regime apologist. He describes Khomeini's return to Iran from his French exile as "a masterful final blow." His description of the Islamic Republic's founder explains that

Khomeini was no messianic irrational figure. He had proved to be a shrewd strategist. He helped rein in the brutality against citizens with an order in December 1982 [now that the major domestic foes had been defeated] protecting the privacy of citizens against illegal search and seizure.

¹ The footnotes contain 23 "Interview with the author" entries, ranging from August 2019 to July 2020. They include the following unknown and unnamed sources: "according to an early trainee," pp. 73-4, nt. 2, 3, 4; "Farid, a high school student who took karate classes just like Qassem ... remembers," p. 30, nt. 1; "an Israeli general remembers," p. 103, nt. 10; "a close family friend remembers," p. 125, nt. 7; Soleimani's "driver would often complain," p. 140-1 nts. 3, 4; "recalls an Afghan member of the Quds forces," p. 149, nt. 10; "Ahmad says" (no last name listed), pp. 159-60, nts. 1, 2, 3; "Iranian officials [said]," p. 184, nt. 1; "a Quds Force member who was part of Iran's Damascus team in the 1990s remembers," pp. 186, nts. 2, 3; "an Iranian present at the meeting remembers," p. 188, nt. 5; "says an Iraqi operative who has lived in the area for years," p. 195, nt. 7; "an Iranian Quds Forces officer said," p. 202, nt. 12; "an Iranian Quds Forces operative remembers" p. 213, nt. 5; "a Quds Forces member says," p. 214, nt. 7; "an official in Yemen's Al-Islah Party [said]," p. 215, nt. 8; "some of his [Soleimani's] men [claim]," p. 251, nt. 4.

And worst of all, he describes Khomeini's regime as a

new Islamic republic [which] was to replace a 2,500-year-old tradition of monarchy, giving birth to a platypus of a creature never before encountered in the annals of history.

First, his reference to a 2,500 year tradition of monarchy likely comes from Muhammad Reza Shah's 1971 hedonistic celebration in Persepolis. Even the shah did not believe his propagandistic claim that his rule represented 2,500 years of continued monarchy since Cyrus the Great (559-530 B.C.) established the Achaemenid dynasty. Evidently, Azizi does. Second, the absurd platypus metaphor may be more appropriate than Azizi thinks. Like Iran, the duck-billed, poison-footed marsupial is a unique evolutionary combination, but its bill is not really a duck's bill just as Iran's trappings of democracy are not real democracy.

Azizi glosses over the horrors of the IRGC's Basij camps where children were turned into killers, blandly asserting,

The IRGC, and its auxiliary voluntary force, Basij, were organized to absorb these young men and send them en masse to the front.

Some may have been young men, but many were children. The Student Basij, a division of the IRGC, was heavily and mercilessly utilized during the Iran-Iraq war with more than 550,000 student fighters sent to the front.² Khomeini's contribution to the



Azizi glosses over the horrors of the IRGC's Basij camps where children were turned into killers. In October 2018, the U.S. accused the Basij of continuing to provide combat training to children.

history of warfare is the advent of human wave attacks carried out by children wearing keys around their necks that they were told would open the gates of heaven upon their martyrdom.³

Azizi also downplays the assistance Iran gave to Osama bin Laden's son and other al-Qaeda fighters. He argues that, after 9/11,

When Al Qaeda figures fled to Iran, they were put under the charge of Soleimani's forces. He kept them under tight control, in a situation of virtual house arrest, and repeatedly offered them as tokens in negotiations with the U.S.

No footnote or attribution follows. Readers are supposed to take his word for it. They should not.

² Hossein Aryan, "[How Scholchildren Are Brainwashed in Iran](#)," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 27, 2010.

³ "A Key to Paradise around Their Necks: Iran's Suicide Battalions," in Christoph Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), chap. 2.

There are also scores of critical comments about Israel, Britain, and the United States. Typical of Azizi's anti-Israeli animus, he describes Gaza as a

little enclave sandwiched between Egypt and Israel, run by Cairo from 1948 to 1967, and occupied by Israel since.

Azizi's terminology reflects his bias—Egypt only “ran” Gaza but Israel “occupied” it—and his failures as a historian are revealed in the assertion that Israel still occupies Gaza when, in fact, control of the Strip was transferred to Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority as early as 1994, and no Israelis have lived in Gaza since 2005 when Ariel Sharon removed them all under his so-called “Disengagement Plan.” Of course, Azizi cannot refer to northern Israel without mentioning “the illegally occupied Golan Heights.”

The United States, he claims, “ended democracy in Iran in the 1953 coup” as though Mossadeq was anything other than a communist stooge from the Moscow-controlled Tudeh party, who had carried out a coup against the shah, whom Azizi erroneously calls “the U.S.-installed Shah.” In fact, the British installed him to power after they removed his father who had sided with Hitler in World War II. And Iran has never been a democracy, not in 1952 and not today.

More ignorance comes in his claim, “In the 1980s, al-Qaeda had invited Muslims from around the world to come and fight the Soviets in Afghanistan,” when al-Qaeda was founded to fight the United States, either after the Soviets had acknowledged defeat in 1988 or after they had left Afghanistan in 1989.

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Objectivity vs. Hyperbole

By contrast, Hegghammer is consistently accurate and neutral, or at least objective,

on scores of issues, allowing readers to come to their own conclusions. For instance, both books end with the deaths of their subjects. Hegghammer calls the murder of Azzam, “the biggest murder mystery in the history of jihadism.” The chapter devoted to forensically exploring the murder of Azzam concludes that it was a complicated operation that “points to a government agency” and breaks down a list of the nine main suspects and discusses their possible motivations and opportunities. Though one might disagree with Hegghammer's dismissing as “highly unlikely” the popular view that Osama bin Laden carried out the attack, his conclusion is a logical one: “If forced to put money on one candidate, this author would reluctantly say the ISI.” “ISI” stands for Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's all-powerful secret police-cum-intelligence agency.

Azizi, on the other hand, can muster nothing but hyperbole and turgid prose for his narration of Soleimani's death. In Donald Trump, Azizi finds the villain of his tale, an unpredictable president with a personal animosity for Soleimani, who carried out a “dangerously escalating course of action [that] included imposing the toughest sanctions in history on Iran” and pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), which Azizi claims “was great.” Trump's “decision to assassinate Soleimani counted as bold and reckless by any standard,” Azizi asserts. Bold, yes. But reckless? The anticipated and feared blowback never came, in spite of dire

warnings from academics and celebrities.⁴

Azizi's attempted apotheosis of Soleimani includes some truly appalling rubbish, from the introduction where he describes a man who "moved seamlessly across borders, as if he could be present in more than one place at the same time" to the epilogue, where the author gushes,

If there was one regime figure who could have changed the calculus of the Iranian people, it could have only been Soleimani, the brave general of faraway lands.

It turns out that "the calculus of the Iranian people" was not changed by a brutish thug like Soleimani, any of the regime's clerical oafs, or any children rushing to "drink the nectar of martyrdom."⁵ Rather, it appears to be undergoing a change initiated by the memory of Masha Amini, a country woman arrested for having her hair insufficiently covered and then killed while in custody.

Hegghammer's book is a must read for anyone who wants to understand the origins of the global jihad movement and the soil from which al-Qaeda sprung. Azizi's book will be lauded in Tehran but otherwise scoffed at.

There will be more, and better, books on Soleimani than *The Shadow Commander*, but it is hard to imagine the need for another Azzam biography, nor the possibility of a better one than *The Caravan*.

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⁴ A.J. Caschetta, "[Mourning Soleimani, from Hollywood to the Campus](#)," *National Review*, Jan. 8, 2020.

⁵ "The Martyrdom of [Mohammed Hossein Famideh](#), the 13-year Old Student," The Islamic Revolutionary Document Center, Tehran, Oct. 30, 1980.